

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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<b>Series:</b>	<b>The Beatitudes</b>		Pastor/Teacher
<b>Number:</b>	<b>6</b>		Gary L.W. Johnson
<b>Text:</b>	<b>Matthew 5:7</b>		
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### BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL

Of all the Beatitudes, this one is perhaps the most misunderstood – not because of the word “merciful” – but because of the way it is worded. This is the only Beatitude in which the promise corresponds exactly to the state. Human nature being what it is, likes to put God in the dock – to place Him in a manageable situation. In other words, to put Him in our debt, to obligate Him. This is how many read this text. In effect, the natural man says, “If I do this . . . God is going to do that for me.” This type of *reasoning* is bound up in the human heart. The English Puritan Thomas Goodwin perceptibly wrote: “We all have *fibra pelagiana* in us, we are naturally all Pelagians,<sup>1</sup> and the great deceit of men’s hearts is, that what opinions they doctrinally condemn in their speculative judgments, those they practically approve in their secret transaction with God for their salvation.”<sup>2</sup> Simply put, our natural tendency is to be *merit-mongers*. Even among Evangelicals, who strongly affirm salvation by grace, we find some dispensationalists<sup>3</sup> who see this text (and others in the Synoptic Gospels like Matt. 6:14f.) saying that God’s mercy appears to be *contingent* on our own. We certainly do not want to read this Beatitude like the Pelagians, nor do I think it correct to follow the lead of certain dispensationalists.<sup>4</sup> How are we to understand these words of Jesus?

**NOTE:** The first four Beatitudes are concerned with *inner principles*, i.e., how we see ourselves before God. The last four Beatitudes can be said to be *manifestations* of the first four. Martyn Lloyd-Jones summed it up this way: “A Christian *is* something before he *does* something.”<sup>5</sup>

I. **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MERCY.** Before unpacking the meaning of this passage as it relates to the issues raised, we need to explore the historical terrain into which it was framed. The Beatitude has to be set against two backgrounds: The O.T., out of which the language is drawn, and the contemporary world into which it was spoken.

A. **The O.T. Language.** *Chesedh* is the Heb. word for “mercy.” In the OT., the word occurs over 150 times, the bulk of which has reference to God’s mercy. Our God “delighteth in mercy” (Micah 7:18). He requires His people to “do justice and to love mercy” (Micah 6:6, 7). “With the merciful He will show himself merciful” (2 Sam. 22:26). God is “ever merciful” (Ps. 37:25). English words like “mercy” and “kindness” are interchangeably used to translate it. The Heb. word *chesedh* has a very *positive* overtone. It means a lot more than what is usually conveyed by our word “mercy” (to treat the undeserving with pity). What is important about the word *chesedh* is the way it is *grouped* with other words.

1. **Truth.** The Heb. is *emeth*, and it does not primarily have reference to intellectual truth, rather it has to do with *steadfastness* and complete *fidelity* to a promise<sup>6</sup> (Gen. 24:27; Ps. 25:10, 36:5, 57:3, 61:7, 89:14, 98:3, 115:1). *Chesedh* is specially linked with God’s fidelity and steadfastness. This in turn helps to unfold the next term with which God’s mercy is connected.

2. **Covenant.**<sup>7</sup> God's mercy is inseparably connected with His covenant (Deut. 7:9; Ps. 89:28; Ex. 24:1-8). *Chesedh* therefore is not a negative thing; it is not the agreement to suspend judgment, to remit penalty, to mitigate justifiable and deserved severity. It is the *outgoing* manifestation of God's covenantal fidelity and love.
- B. **The N.T. Language.** The Greek word for mercy is *eleos*. God is rich in mercy (Eph. 2:4). Salvation is due to God's mercy (Tit. 3:5). Mercy is found at the throne of grace (Heb. 4:16). Over and over again in God's mercy is highlighted in the N.T. (1 Pet. 1:3; Jude 21; Rom. 9:23, 11:31, 15:9).
- C. **The World In N. T. Times.** The parable of Jesus about the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-37) illustrated the contemporary mindset of Judaism. They were merciless towards "sinners" and Gentiles (Lk. 7:34, 13:2, 15:2). The Roman world was worse. Slaves were beaten and killed at the whim of their masters. Unwanted children were abandoned. Mercy was considered a contemptible weakness.
- II. **MERCY: AN OPERATIVE PRINCIPLE.** Mercy is more than a feeling. It is more than words; "it is that which exerts itself in doing good, being a fruit of the love of God shed abroad in the heart."<sup>9</sup>
- A. **The Substance of Mercy.** How is mercy manifested? Certainly it is physical (James 2:15, 16). It shows itself in *acts* of mercy. The merciful are compassionate. But it goes farther. It encompasses another dimension – a concern for the lost (2 Tim. 2:25; Tit. 1:13; Jude 23). It is evidenced in prayer and confrontation. "Mercy prods," says John MacArthur. "There has to be the confrontation about sin before there can ever be the realization of sinfulness."<sup>10</sup> Why the promise that the merciful will be shown mercy? It is the merciful who *know* mercy. This Beatitude reflects the fact that the merciful are the very same ones who are conscious of their spiritual bankruptcy (v. 3), mourn over it (v. 4), and hunger and thirst for righteousness (v. 6). Therefore the Christian is merciful toward the wretched. Why? "Because," says D. A. Carson, "he recognizes himself to be wretched; in being merciful he is also shown mercy."<sup>11</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** Kenneth Bailey has this helpful summary: "*Showing Mercy* has two basic meanings. The first has to do with compassion that is composed of feelings and actions. The father in the story of the prodigal son *had compassion* and *ran*. His merciful feelings translated into dramatic actions. Again and again Jesus is described as having compassion for the needy around him (Mt. 9:36; 14:14; 18:27; Mk. 1:41; 6:34; Lk. 7:13; 10:33). At times the feelings are not mentioned and only the compassionate action is recorded. The blind beggar beside the road cried out to Jesus, *Son of David, have mercy on me* (Lk. 18:38). Jesus responds with healing. To respond to human need with compassion and action is at the core of what being merciful is all about. But there is more. To be merciful and to obtain mercy are profoundly related to forgiving and being forgiven. But here again we face a paradox that is like a diamond. Any attempt to force a diamond to shed all its light in one direction would destroy it. In like manner the paradox of giving and receiving mercy/forgiveness has to do with these questions: (1) Do we forgive others *as God forgives us*? (2) Or do we forgive others first *so that God will then forgive us*? Or finally, (3) does *God forgive us* and *then we are able to forgive others*? All three of these ideas are available in the New Testament in the following texts.

1. The Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:9-13 asks that God *forgive us* our sins (our trespasses and debts) *as we forgive* the sins of others against us. It sounds as if the two forms of forgiveness happen in parallel.

2. But the Lord's Prayer in Luke 11:4 reads, *Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive every one who is indebted to us.* This reading of the Lord's Prayer affirms that we must forgive others before we can approach God seeking forgiveness for ourselves.
3. Finally there is the story of the unforgiving servant (Mt. 18:23-35) who was first forgiven by his master but then refused to forgive another servant. For his failure he was condemned; as 2 John 4:19 affirms, "We love, because he first loved us."

Which of these three patterns of forgiveness best explain this Beatitude? Or should we choose all three? In the ever-changing challenges of striving to be faithful, all three mysteriously make sense. They do not fit together logically, but whoever claimed that mercy and forgiveness are logical? All three are important for Christian faith and life. To show mercy or to forgive is extremely difficult for those who have been deeply wronged. But the alternative is self-destruction through nursing grudges or seeking revenge. Such grievances are often passed on from generation to generation and become a destructive force in the lives of individuals and societies. But blessed escape these self-crippling cycles, for they are merciful. But there is more. This Beatitude claims that the merciful *shall obtain mercy*. From whom will they obtain mercy? Here again Jesus uses a *divine passive*. That is, the merciful will obtain the mercy of God. The mercy of their fellow human beings may be in short supply, but the mercy of God will never fail them."<sup>13</sup> Mercy is only appreciated by those who see themselves in need of mercy. It is only those who have experienced mercy who know what mercy is. "He who stands under judgment only finds comfort again in the pledge of mercy. But once the outstretched hand of mercy has been grasped, the selfsame grace,<sup>13</sup> according both to gospel teaching and personal experience, creates in us the will to do good and to show mercy."<sup>14</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Pelagius (the arch-foe of Augustine) was a 5<sup>th</sup> cent. British monk who denied original sin and human depravity. He taught that human nature was endowed by God to do all that God commanded – responsibility implied ability. There is no need for grace or redemption in Pelagianism. Simply put, man earns his own salvation.

<sup>2</sup> *The Works of Thomas Goodwin*, VI (rpt. James Nichol, 1863), p. 248.

<sup>3</sup> The dispensationalist Lewis Sperry Chafer wrote: "The exact condition revealed in this promise should be carefully considered; for, in this passage, mercy from God is made to depend wholly on the exercise of mercy towards others. This is pure law." *Systematic Theology*, IV (The Seminary Press, 1948), p. 217. This position, as you will remember from Notes, No. 1, sees the Sermon on the Mount as **not** being addressed nor directly concerned with Christians..

<sup>4</sup> Not all dispensationalists fall under this criticism. A noted example is John MacArthur in his *Kingdom Living Here and Now* (Moody, 1980), a work I have referred to a number of times in this series.

<sup>5</sup> M. Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (Eerdmans, 1959), p. 96.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. extended discussion in W. Barclay, *The Beatitudes And The Lord's Prayer for Everyman* (Harper & Row, 1975), pp. 62-64.

<sup>7</sup> The word *chesedh*, in all its varied shades of meaning, is conditional upon there being a covenant. Without the prior existence of a covenant, there could never be any *chesedh* at all. The word represents that attitude to a covenant without which that covenant could not continue to exist. It has no meaning apart from such a case as Isaiah 49:6, it is always conditioned by the terms of the covenant. Another Heb. word '*ahabah* is God's Election-Love, whilst *chesedh* is His Covenant-Love." Norman H. Snaith, *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament* (Schocken, 1973), p. 95.

<sup>8</sup> "One of the virtues of counterfeit sanctity," observed Martin Luther, "is that it cannot have pity or mercy for the frail and weak, but insists on the strictest enforcement and the purest selection; as soon as there is even a minor flaw, all mercy is gone, and there is nothing but fuming and fury." *The Place of Trust: Martin Luther on the Sermon on the Mount*, ed. M. E. Marty (Harper & Row, 1983), p. 65.

<sup>9</sup> A. W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount* (Baker, 1953), p. 31.

<sup>10</sup> MacArthur, op. cit., p. 117.

<sup>11</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount: An Evangelical Exposition of Matthew 5-7* (Baker, 1978), p. 24.

<sup>12</sup> K. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (IVP, 2008), p. 82.

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<sup>13</sup>How does mercy differ from grace? The puritan Thomas Manton makes this distinction. “The good angels, that never sinned, are not saved out of mercy, for they were never miserable; but out of grace, which doth all things gratis freely. There is no merit on the creature’s part, but we are saved out of mercy and grace too. That the world of the ungodly are damned is due desert; that any are saved, it is mere grace and favor. The notion of mercy is of great use to prevent despair, which may befall the sinning creature. So is also the notion of grace to prevent carnal confidence, or glorying in ourselves, which is very incident to us.” *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton*, XXII (rpt. Maranatha, n.d.), p. 342.

<sup>14</sup>Hans Windisch, *The Meaning of the Sermon on the Mount*, trans. S. M. Gilmour (Westminster, 1937), p 177.